THE LABOUR MONTHLY

A MAGAZINE OF INTERNATIONAL LABOUR

Editor: R. PALME DUTT

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WHERE IS CANADA HEADING FOR?

The "Constitutional Issue"

By MAURICE SPECTOR

THE former premier, Mackenzie King, was talking in the House. The grandson of the "Little Rebel," William Lyon Mackenzie, whose short-lived insurrection of 1837 had been instrumental in forcing so-called "responsible government" from Downing Street, had just been given a taste of "irresponsible government" and was swallowing hard. Beaten on the question of the Custo ms Scandal involving his Cabinet, he had advised His Excellency the Governor-General to dissolve Parliament. Instead Baron Byng called upon the willing Tory leader, Meighen, to form a government. An unprecedented course of conduct this, King complains, for the Crown to refuse dissolution to its ministerial adviser. There has been nothing like it in Great Britain for the last hundred years—or are we to understand that Canada has reverted to the status of a Crown Colony? "Are you trying to start a rebellion?" shouts a Tory back-bencher. "No," comes King's heroic retort, "I am trying to prevent one."

But can he? Can King or anybody else stop the political and social forces at work for the separation of Canada from the Empire? Is Canada heading for another but more important and large-scale "Rebellion of 1837?" Certain it is that the Dominion has run into the biggest "constitutional crisis" in its history—a crisis that may well mark a turning point in relations with the Empire. The action of the Governor-General in refusing dissolution to King only to grant this privilege to the Conservative leader sixty-five hours later, has forced the issue of Canadian "status" well into the foreground of a general election. The revelations of the Customs Scandal, the immediate cause of King's downfall, fades into relative insignificance. It is common knowledge that both capitalist parties are corrupt. Both, according to the evidence submitted before the Investigating Commission, had accepted contributions to their election funds from the liquor manufacturers. However Meighen may deny there is any "constitutional issue" at all, and

however much Mackenzie King and his timid followers interpret the crisis in terms of Gladstonian parliamentary tradition, the point at stake is fundamentally the status of Canada as a Dominion.

On this question of self-determination, Lord Byng has helpfully put a stop to the confusion of tendency with accomplished fact, and vindicated the position of the "extremists." "Lord Byng," writes the well-known British student of colonial development, Professor Keith, "in refusing the dissolution of the Parliament, has challenged effectively the doctrine of the equality of status of the Dominions and the United Kingdom and has relegated Canada decisively to the colonial status she had believed she had outgrown." Neither in fact nor in international law, were Great Britain and Canada ever equals. The British North America Act, which is the constitution of Canada, is an act of the Imperial Parliament and can only be amended by that authority. The interpretation of that Act and Constitution lies in the last analysis not with the Supreme Court of Canada but with the Privy Council in London, as when it declared the Lemieux (Industrial Disputes Investigation) Act *ultra vires* of the Dominion Government. Canada can declare neither war nor peace. When Great Britain is at war, Canada is liable to be automatically treated as a belligerent by powers at war with England. The Governor-General is not only head of the State but a commissioner dispatched from London to report on Canadian matters.

That Byng's intervention was not accidental but bears the earmarks of a Downing Street policy of imperial self-assertion against centrifugal tendencies is furthermore attested by some recent Australian experiences. Not long ago a memorandum was signed by every state in Australia except Victoria asking the Dominions' Secretary Amery to consider appointing local men in place of imperial products, to the posts of State Governor. Downing Street's reply was that as the matter was not unanimous it had better stand over. A few months ago the Governor of New South Wales deliberately refused the advice of his ministers to sanction the appointment of a sufficient number of labour senators to the Upper House to have given the Labour Government a complete majority. A direct appeal to Downing Street brought the reply that the action of the King's representative was above criticism. Apparently

England is not going to loosen the bonds of Empire more than she is compelled to. The "wretched colonies" are no longer regarded in Disraeli's phrase, "as a millstone around England's neck." They are of immense strategic, political and commercial value. Imperial influence was brought to bear against Sir Wilfrid Laurier in 1911, when his autonomist leanings caused him to refuse to accept wholly Churchill's views on building Dreadnoughts for Imperial service. The tendency of Canada towards separatism since the conclusion of the war has far outstripped the pace of Laurier's days, and the position of the Empire is far more precarious than it ever was then.

Among the Dominions, it is Canada particularly which confronts the British Foreign Office with the problem of the waning British and rising American Empire. "The far-flung British Empire," said Sir Auckland Geddes, former British Ambassador to Washington in his Page Memorial lecture (1924) "has yielded the leadership of the world in many respects to the compact empire of the United States. The Dominions look upon the government of Washington as of their own generation . . . and Washington with its inviting eyes looks back on them . . ." Some time ago, the U.S. Department of Commerce published a review of the extent of the American investment in Canada, which stated that "economically and socially Canada may be considered as the northern extension of the United States and our trade with Canada is in many respects more like domestic trade than our trade with other countries." Between 1915 and 1922 the British investment remained stationary while the United States increased their investment six-fold. Now one-fourth of all American investments are in Canada. In the eight years ending 1922, only 2 per cent. of Canada's borrowings were from Great Britain, but 33 per cent. were from the U.S. Some 1,200 American branch factories have been established in the Dominion (fostered, ironically enough, by the very preferential tariff that was to bind Canada closer to Imperial Britain). The U.S. own a third of all the industries and producing mines of the Dominion and at the present rate of economic penetration it is just a question of time when the U.S. capitalists become majority stockholders in Canadian economic enterprise. This growing American influence was admitted on the Canadian side,

when Frederick Hudd, Canadian Trade Commissioner in the U.S. and special delegate to the Pan-American Congress in New York last year, declared that "Canada is an integral part of economic America. The commercial, economic and strategic problems common to us all furnish indestructible grounds for enduring and permanent co-operation. There is no problem too difficult for the countries of Latin America and North America to solve provided they stand together as a United States of the American Continent."

Another separatist factor is the increasing industrialisation of the Dominion (accelerated in marked degree by the war and since 1920 by the aid of American capital). Neither Canadian Liberals nor Conservatives are prepared to adopt economic policies to meet the requirements of British industry for a greater market overseas. At the Imperial Conference of 1923, British diplomacy failed to "put over" such preference, emigration, and capital export policies as would keep Britain the industrial centre of the Empire and the Dominions, chiefly producers of primary products. Mackenzie King continually emphasised that Canada was the second largest manufacturing country in the Empire. As for the Tories, who politically parade as the ultra loyalists—theirs is a policy of economic nationalism and protection which opposes even the present preferential arrangement with Britain.

The unsatisfactory internal economic position of the country since the war has also helped to cool imperial ardour. The fifteen years prior to the war were years of exceeding prosperity for the Canadian bourgeoisie. Immigrants flowed in by hundreds of thousands. The third transcontinental railway was in the course of construction. Taxation was low. Military expenditure only amounted to twelve out of 130 million dollars of federal revenue. The war came. Immigration stopped. The heavily over-capitalised transcontinental systems went bankrupt and had to be centralised in a government-owned system with a deficit of a hundred million dollars a year. The increased military expenditure saddled the country with a *huge war debt.* Tens of thousands of Canadians actually began to leave the country. The result of this economic slump has been to strain the never-robust structure of Canadian Confederation to the breaking point. Secessionist tendencies have

arisen both in the Maritime Provinces in the extreme East and in the grain producing provinces of the West. Both sections are dissatisfied with the results of Confederation, complaining of exploitation at the hands of the manufacturing-financial interests of Central Canada (Ontario and Quebec).

This post-war situation in which Canada finds itself—British imperial decline, industrialisation, American penetration, dragging economic development, has naturally made her very cautious of imperial commitments. When Admiral Jellicoe semi-officially proposes that Canada should contribute 36 million dollars a year towards the maintenance of the Imperial Navy and provide a squadron of four cruisers at an annual cost of maintenance of four million dollars more, there is no visible enthusiasm. All sorts of embarrassing queries arise, particularly in Quebec. After all, what real community of interests in matters of foreign policy does there exist between Great Britain and Canada? Is Canada interested in India or the Suez Canal? "Our imperial policy," exclaims the French-Canadian nationalist Bourassa in the House, "I ask any honourable member of the House, have we the same interests in Irak or Mosul as the oil hunters of England have? That Europe should be reaping the results of a policy of national hatred and economic rivalry is no wonder, but why impose upon this country the consequences of that policy?" Take the possibility inherent in the Locarno Pact of an Anglo-French conflict. Is French-speaking Quebec, which was so indifferent about the war with Germany, likely to be more interested in fighting France?

How this growing feeling of the separation of interests manifests itself may be gathered from the recent manoeuvres of the leading capitalist politicans. It will be remembered that when, during the Chanak crisis, Lloyd George attempted to embroil the Dominion in a war with Turkey he was sharply rebuffed by the King Government. Meighen, leader of the Tory Opposition, thereupon derided the separatism of the Government and claimed that he would have replied to Downing Street's appeal for war-preparedness with a proud, "Ready, Aye Ready." Meighen's jingo speech, added to his imperialist war record generally, gave further impetus to the political suicide of his Party in Quebec which at the last elections returned three Conservatives out of a possible sixty. After this

debacle, political expendiency led Meighen to change his tune. In the now famous Hamilton " keynote " speech, he declared his " belief that it would be best that not only Parliament should be called upon but that the decision of the government, which, of course, would have to be given promptly, should be submitted to the judgment of the people before troops leave our shore." Meighen's speech was not taken too seriously in London, which realised that he was proposing a khaki election with his own fine Italian hand disfranchising the " alien-born " section of the electorate to make the country safe for the Empire. Still it was a sign of the times that Meighen should even be forced to pretend a new orientation. When J. S. Woodsworth, the labour representative, subsequently moved his resolution that " in the opinion of this House, Canada should refuse to accept responsibility for the complications arising from the foreign policy of the United Kingdom," he was viciously assailed by a few Tory back-benchers but was received in silence by the official party leaders, who thereby admitted he was giving expression to an increasing body of Dominion public opinion.

Meanwhile there was the approaching Imperial Conference at which the chief topic of discussion, according to the *Morning Post*, was to be imperial foreign policy, particularly the questions of " imperial defence " and Locarno. In anticipation of this agenda, King proceeded to move a resolution : " That for the acceptance of any treaty, convention or agreement involving military or economic sanctions, the approval of the Parliament of Canada should be secured." He went on to remind the House that such a resolution would be in harmony with the position taken by Canada at the last Imperial Conference, that the Dominions should be free to negotiate treaties specifically affecting their interests and not " involving the interests of the Empire as a whole." The commercial treaty the Dominion signed with Belgium shortly after was similarly negotiated by Canadian plenipotentiaries. Before the country was committed to the obligations of the Treaty of Locarno, he urged, Parliament should be given the opportunity of deciding for or against its ratification. The resolution carried without division, a development that did not escape the attention of the French press. The *Quotidien* at any rate wrote that " hitherto the great Anglo-

Saxon communities have held themselves bound by negotiations carried on by the British Foreign Office. Canada's decision has every prospect of establishing a precedent throughout the Empire, for Australia is clearly separatist in matters of international politics and South Africa shows a similar mentality in discussing the problem of a flag for the Union. At the Imperial Conference . . . the Dominion governments must make clear their policies in regard to Locarno and other questions."

But the problems of "imperial defence" and Locarno are precisely what cause so much disquiet in the Dominions. In Australia the leader of the Opposition, Charlton, attacked the Treaty, and Bruce, the Premier, did not defend it very zealously. The Irish Free State is cold towards it. Herzog of South Africa shows scant sympathy. In India the government disallowed a resolution introduced disapproving it. It is not a very pleasant prospect for England to have the Dominion Parliaments publicly discussing her foreign treaties with perhaps the chance of openly rejecting them. Under these circumstances, Meighen is decidedly preferable to King. To refuse dissolution to the latter in order to grant it to Meighen, was to hand over the election machinery to the Tories. (In Canada the party in office appoints the returning officers.) The British Press has been quite cynical about the importance of this control of election machinery, explaining that Canadian politics are characterised by graft and corruption and that is the reason for Mackenzie King's outburst of resentment that Baron Byng should have taken the machinery out of reach of his grasp. Byng has thereby practically put himself at the head of the Conservative Party whose victory would, for the time at least, be more conducive to British imperial interests. King as a liberal capitalist politician and "constitutionalist," is, of course, very timid of attacking Byng directly. He throws the blame for the Governor-General's intervention on the misleading advice of Arthur Meighen. But a prominent Liberal, Principal Grant of Upper Canada College, has given utterance to the inner feelings of the anti-conservative rank-and-file when he says with respect to Byng's intervention "that if he gets away with it it will set a constitutional precedent. If not, it brings the office of Governor-General nearer to an end."

There is undoubtedly a constitutional issue in this Election. But the issue is not merely—why did Lord Byng refuse the advice of the late Premier and accept the advice of dissolution from the present Premier? The issue is—why is Lord Byng here at all to govern as the appointee and representative of an outside power? Why is Canada still in leading strings? In other words, the constitutional issue is the issue of the constitution. This is an issue on which the workers must take up a position. They are vitally affected by the regime of the British North America Act. It does matter to the workers whether the country in which they carry on their struggle for freedom from wage-slavery is a colony or whether it has achieved its complete sovereignty. The workers are confronted not only with capitalism but with the ramifications of capitalist-imperialism. Not only are they interested that they shall not be the pawns of British foreign policy and imperialist wars, but that the concessions they wring in the way of immediate social legislation shall not be at the mercy of the British North America Act, or the interpretation of its powers and jurisdiction by the Privy Council in London. The Senate killed the Old Age Pensions Bill that was passed through the House of Commons. But assuming that it had carried it, the right of the Federal Government to pass such legislation might still have been questioned on appeal to the Privy Council. Despite all statements to the contrary, Canada is still a colony of Great Britain, a part of the British Empire, one of the greatest machines in the world for the exploitation of the working class and coloured peoples. That is why the Labour Party, in its Ontario Section at least, takes a position in favour of the complete self-determination and sovereignty of Canada and why the Left wing of the Labour Party, headed by the Communists, takes a more specific position for the annulment of the British North America Act, the separation of Canada from the Empire, and Canadian Independence.